

Research Brief

Effort-Based Ability

Question: Effort-Based Ability: What research is available to suggest that students have limitless potential, bound only by the adults who work around them?

Summary of Findings:

In recent years there has been significant study of the effort-based ability model. One of the leading proponents, Jonathon Saphier, describes the model as “the belief that all children can do rigorous academic work even if they come to school needing a significant amount of time and support to catch up.” He writes that this belief “makes a huge difference in how well staff members use the collaborative structures we create on behalf of student learning. It provides the energy needed to persevere when the work of schools is tough.”

At the center of Saphier’s effort-based ability model is the power of a professional learning community to create a climate of high achievement for all students. His work focuses on the importance of relationships between teacher and student and the intentional building of mutual support within the school community. It also includes development of protocols for building student confidence and risk-taking and an opportunity for the student to be empowered using their personal influence and control (Saphier & D’Auria, 1993). The effort-based model emphasizes that in “...in schools that embody the effort-based ability model, all students must receive the three crucial messages--- “This is important,” “You can do it,” and “I won’t give up on you.”

Saphier suggests that it is the capacity to learn and not ability that is innate to all learners. He argues that ability can be nurtured and grown when teachers, and students, believe that effective effort is the main determinant of achievement. He found that a climate of high achievement includes the use of explicit teaching strategies designed to promote high achievement. He emphasizes that a climate of high achievement must follow a pattern of change and reflect the following transition in beliefs

| From . . . | To . . . |
|---|--|
| Mistakes as a sign of weakness. | Mistakes help one learn. |
| Speed counts. Faster is Smarter | Care, perseverance, and craftsmanship count. |
| Good students do it by themselves. | Good students need help and learn from feedback |
| Inborn intelligence is the main determinant of success. | Effort and achievement strategies are the main determinants of success |
| Only the bright few can achieve at a high level. | Everyone is capable of high achievement. |

The Southern Regional Educational Board's (www.sreb.org) nationally recognized project *High Schools That Work* has identified the characteristics of high schools focused on high levels of achievement for all students. The project found that teacher behavior, classroom structures and procedures, classroom climate and relationships between adults and students contributed to their success. The Efficacy Institute in Massachusetts identified the importance of teaching students explicit strategies for expending effort and being successful was also important. (www.efficacy.org).

Key Practices

The literature identifies several key components of a school focused on high achievement for all. They include effective school leadership, teachers who are effective and use instructional strategies linked to student learning, presence of a demanding curriculum, and rigorous academic standards. Central to each of these practices is the belief that every student, given appropriate instruction and adequate time, can master the curriculum and be successful in school.

The list of *High Schools That Work* Key Practices <http://www.sreb.org> provide a model for teacher behaviors/practices that, when used regularly, addresses student effort-based ability. Those key practices include:

High Expectations: Set higher expectations and get career-bound students to meet them.

Career/Technical Studies: Increase access to challenging career/technical studies, with a major emphasis on using high-level skills in the context of modern workplace practices and in preparation for continued learning.

Academic Studies: Increase access to academic studies that teach the essential concepts from the college-preparatory curriculum by encouraging students to use academic content and skills to address real-world projects and problems.

Program of Study: Have students complete a challenging program of study with an upgraded academic core that includes four years of college-preparatory English and three years each of mathematics and science (at least two years in each area equivalent to college-preparatory courses).

Work-based Learning: Give students and their parents the choice of a system that integrates school-based and work-based learning. The system should span high school and postsecondary studies and should be planned by educators, employers, and employees.

Teachers Working Together: Implement an organizational structure that provides academic and career/technical teachers the time to plan and provide integrated instruction aimed at teaching high-level academic and technical content.

Students Actively Engaged: Get every student involved in rigorous and challenging learning.

Guidance: Involve each student and his or her parents in a guidance and advising system.

Extra Help: Provide a structured system of extra help to enable students who may lack adequate preparation to complete an accelerated program of study that includes high-level academic and technical content.

Keeping Score: Use student assessment and program evaluation data to continuously improve the school climate, organization, management, curricula, and instruction to advance student learning and to recognize students who meet both curriculum and performance goals. (Pamela Frome: *High Schools That Work: Findings from the 1996 and 1998 Assessments* <http://www.sreb.org>).

Adopting an effort-based approach to learning requires strong support by school leaders. Such an approach is a significant departure from the way most schools have been organized and operated. School leaders must challenge beliefs that limit student learning, provide professional development opportunities for teachers, advocate for changing instruction, and affirm a climate where the freedom to take risks is evident and respected. Encouragement to change their beliefs about the effort and ability of students must be genuine and frequent. It necessitates adoption of the approach suggested by Michael Fullan who wrote “. . . we can act our way to new beliefs.”

Online Resources

High Schools That Work – A Program of The Southern Regional Education Board. This paper outlines an effort-based school improvement initiative founded on the conviction that most students can master rigorous academic and career/technical studies if the school leaders and teachers create an environment that motivates student to make the effort to succeed.
www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/HSTWindex.asp

The paper, *Effort, not Ability* by Gene Bottoms provides a description of the power of effort-based ability as a simple idea yet radical in the way it challenges school leaders, teachers and other educational service providers. <http://www.sreb.org>

Raising Academic Achievement of Vocational Completers Through the Reform of School Practice.

This work is a guide for school leaders to use when planning and conducting professional development that makes a difference. It is a step-by-step approach including an evaluation tool that allows participants to rate the effectiveness of the professional development.
<http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/special/ncrrpt.doc>

Power of Professional Learning Communities

The chapter written by Jonathon Saphier explores the behavior of schools and teachers who have a belief in “effort-based ability”: the belief that all children can do rigorous academic work even if they come to school needing a significant amount of time and support to catch up.
<http://www.eddigest.com/html/RDuFour.html>

How Mastery Learning Can Address Our Nation’s Science Education Needs. Paper presented by Thomas Guskey. This paper discussed how mastery learning can combine the strengths of direct instruction with the strengths of discovery learning. This paper describes how mastery learning is being used in Missouri schools to enhance the quality of instruction in science at all grade levels. In addition, the dramatic results in student science achievement that have occurred within the state since this program's inception are discussed.

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/>

http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/15/a1/cb.pdf

A Classic Look at Effective Schools by Larry Lezotte (1992ERIC Document ED359611. This paper links Deming's Total Quality Management (TQM) theory for organizational management with the effective-schools literature. The first part compares the 14 principles of TQM with the tenets of effective-schools research. The second part develops a blueprint for creating the total quality effective school.

http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/13/f9/3c.pdf

Learning from Success: A Leverage for Transforming Schools Into Learning Communities - Schechter, C., Sykes, I., & Rosenfeld, J. (2004). *Planning and Changing*. 35(3-4), 154-168. Teachers must learn to learn, and thereby develop their abilities to engage in ongoing learning so as to survive and thrive in turbulent and uncertain learning environments. Here, Schechterl discuss the importance of collective retrospective learning as an inbuilt vehicle in the ongoing pursuit toward learning schools. They also explore on the predisposition to learn from problems and failures and pinpoint both the opportunities and obstacles presented by this form of learning. http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/3c/80/4b.pdf

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